Man for all seasons

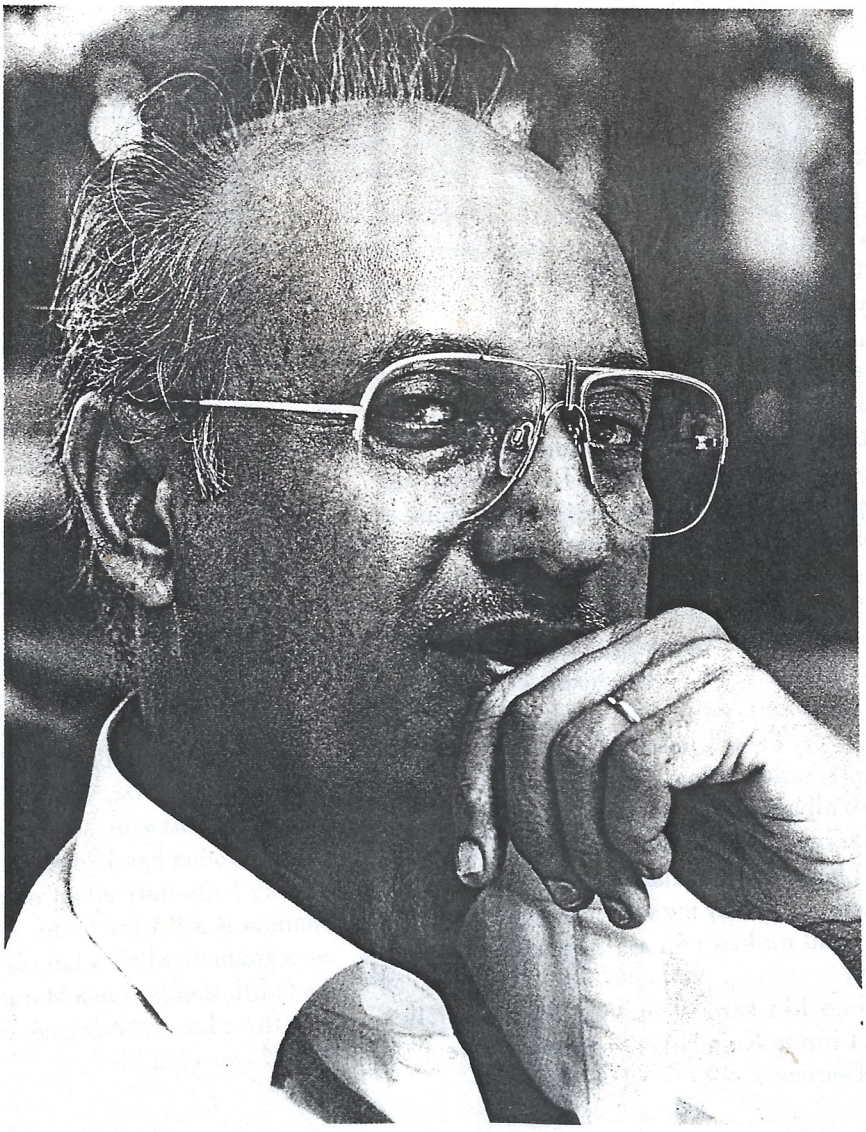
REMEMBERING MANMOHAN DESAI ON HIS 7TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

I was only 24 when I met Manmohan Desai. Just eight years later (on March 1, 1994), this man who was full of *joie de vivre,* was gone.

Man*ji* still seems like the least likely candidate for self-annihilation.

Though his aching back was constantly a cause for worry, he still held forth on movies and life with an infectious zest. His comments on offbeat films and film-makers had me in splits. His films were populist art, though catch him admitting to anything arty about his works! His cinematic world encompassed an utopia where high melodrama resolved itself magically. To his abiding exasperation, critics insisted on searching for logic in his films.

"Do they realise how much brains and money are needed to make my kind of films?" he would ask belligerently, "I enjoy what I'm doing... I'm on the sets all the time. My attitude towards cinema is very serious. I'm involved with every department of film-making except photography. I rarely



attend parties. I don't smoke or drink. My passion is film-making. According to the critics, if you make anything escapist it isn't serious cinema. Only gloomy and dull films are serious! But my kind of films require lots of brains."

That was Man*ji*, straight from the hip. His back was giving him hell. "Someone told me about a chap who cures bad backs with a kick. I'm ready to offer him a lakh for doing this. But *if* I don't get cured, I will kick him back," Man*ji* had chuckled. This was in 1986. Today, he would have offered a crore to have his back cured. If he was still alive.

The Big IF! When I met him, Man*ji* was worried about the poor collections of his son's film *Toofan*: "I'm the monster in Ketan's life. I've already done everything there's to do with Amitabh. What's left for Ketan to do?"

Ironically, Man*ji* described his mega-entertainer, *Amar Akbar Anthony* as "rubbish". He preferred *Naseeb, Coolie* and even *Mard*. But his personal favourite was *Aa Gale Lag Ja*. When cynics laughed at the concept of Shashi Kapoor impregnating Sharmila Tagore by giving her "body heat," Man*ji* bellowed back, "What the hell do they mean by escapist films? I make what I like. I love *Mother India*. Every time I see it, I get an inferiority complex."

Ignoring the sniggers, he did the 'body heat' act again in his last directorial venture *Ganga Jamuna Saraswathi* with Amitabh Bachchan and Meenakshi Seshadri. He defended every film of his like a lion protecting his cubs. He would point out that the lost-and-found formula began with the Ashok Kumar-starrer *Kismet* in 1943 and that it was a convenient peg to hang his ideas on.

Coolie

Manmohan Desai was a genius... He told the audience in the very first frame, 'I'm going to make a fool of you'

AMITABH BACHCHAN

His favourite actors were Raj Kapoor, Nutan, Lalita Pawar, Nirupa Roy and of course Amitabh Bachchan. For his first film *Chhalia* in 1960, he signed Raj Kapoor and Nutan. Then followed the ill-fated *Bluff Master* and *Budtameez*. Both the Shammi Kapoor-starrers bombed miserably. His harvest of hits started with the espionage thriller *Kismat* in 1968. For the first time a leading man (Biswajeet) did a drag-act in *Kismat*. After Shamshad Begum sang *Kajra mohabbatwala*, for Biswajeet, she never sang again for a Hindi film.

Sacha Jhootha in 1971 fetched Rajesh Khanna his first *Filmfare* award. The next year Man*ji* had three releases, *Bhai Ho To Aisa, Rampur Ka Lakshman* and *Shararat*. The first two were hits.

Mard

I'm the monster in Ketan's life. I've already done everything there's to do with Amitabh. What's left for Ketan?

MANMOHAN DESAI

Roti in 1974 was one of Rajesh Khanna's last major successes as a leading man.

1977 was a watershed year for Manji. Four of his big-budget spectacles—*Amar Akbar Anthony, Chacha Bhatija, Parvarish* and *Dharmveer*—were blockbusters during this year. Said Manji, "*Amar Akbar Anthony* involved minimum effort, labour and money. It was a fluke hit. When it was released, I thought it had good songs. But I never thought it would be such a big success. I was sure *Aa Gale Lag Jaa* would be a super-hit while *Amar Akbar Anthony* would flop."

Aa Gale Lag Jaa

Naseeb in 1981 was Manji's most expensive film, followed by *Suhaag* and *Desh Premee*. In 1983, during *Coolie*, when the Big B suffered his near-fatal accident, Manji had to give in to popular sentiments and let his hero live at the end. "Audiences would have been very disappointed if Amitabh was shown dying at the end of *Coolie*," said the emotional film-maker.

After *Mard* in 1985 and *Ganga Jamuna Saraswathi* in 1988, Manji retired from movie-making. Those close to him say he had secretly become depressed in his final days. The plot for *Amar Akbar Anthony* was inspired by a newspaper report about a man who left all his three children at different places and then committed suicide. "What if the man didn't kill himself?" Manji wondered.

And we wonder the same about him.

The Big B who was so close to him once said, "Manmohan Desai was the genius who had the audacity to tell the audience in the very first frame, 'I'm going to make a fool of you. I'm going to be illogical and you had better enjoy it'. Magically the audience did. He had no pretensions. The audience knew he believed in the improbable and went along with him. They just loved him."

SKJ

Naseeb